

FOSTER PARENTING



Judy Calvert, left, and Lesley MacLeman of Vernon say their desire to help foster children was inspired by the devotion of the Department of Children and Families staff and volunteers they encountered.

'It's all about the kids'

By James White

For the Journal Inquirer

Lesley MacLeman and Judy Calvert of Vernon say they want to share the joy and satisfaction of becoming foster parents, and at the same time make a difference in the life of other foster children across the state.

"These two have gone above and beyond," says Debbie Jones, a liaison with the Connecticut Association of Foster and Adoptive Parents, who worked with MacLeman and Calvert while they went through DCF training courses last year.

Jones was referring to MacLeman and Calvert's leap from serving as new foster parents to running a toy collection program to provide foster children statewide with holiday gifts.

The couple, both employed by the Eastern Connecticut Health Network at Rockville General Hospital, organized the toy drive last October for children in foster care.

They set up donation boxes at Rockville General Hospital and at each of the other three hospitals run by ECHN, and collected more than 500 gifts, including toys, clothing, gift cards, and movie passes.

"We tried to gear it more toward teenagers," says Jones, who herself cares for six foster children. "They tend to be forgotten."

According to MacLeman, the idea of a toy drive originated during DCF training classes. Prospective foster parents take an intensive series of classes to prepare them for when they take in foster children.

The courses, which run for 10 weeks, try to introduce foster parent candidates to a variety of cultural backgrounds and to explain laws and statutes relevant to foster parents.

One of the issues covered is mutual respect for each other's background.

"The children don't just need to fit into your culture," says MacLeman. "You need to understand theirs as well."

According to Lisa Flower-Murphy, a spokeswoman for DCF, the courses aren't for everybody. Typically, about 17 families start the series. The figure drops to about a third who actually complete the training.

"Some people just aren't meant to do this," she says.

During the classes, Culvert and MacLeman said, they became aware of children whose holiday wishes were likely to go unfulfilled.

More than 6,000 Connecticut children are in the protective care of the DCF, and not all are immediately placed in foster homes.

To promote the toy drive, MacLeman created a video featuring fictional foster children and their holiday wishes. The video, which was shown at several ECHN facilities, advertised the toy drives and DCF's constant need for foster parents.

MacLeman produced the video, titled "A Toy Box," using her home computer and non-copyrighted images downloaded from the internet.

The video, which is just over six minutes long, also featured songs from the movie "Pay it Forward."

The high-quality production of the video, which was burned to DVD, impressed many who saw it. "It looks

like it was done professionally," says Flower-Murphy.

"I just enjoy playing around on the computer," says MacLeman.

Calvert and MacLeman took in their first foster children — both girls, ages 13 and 15 — in September.

According to MacLeman, if a foster home is a good match for a child, they typically stay in that home for between two months and a year.

MacLeman and Calvert stress that their desire to help foster children was inspired by the devotion of the DCF staff and volunteers they encountered.

"They don't just give you kids and walk away," explains MacLeman. She says many staffers gave her their home phone numbers, never hesitating to ensure that her questions were answered.

"We're all part of a team," says Jones. "It's all about the kids."

Given the success of the toy drive, MacLeman said, she's excited to begin work on other projects with DCF. One of her goals is to redecorate the DCF's office to make it a more inviting atmosphere for foster children.

"I really want to make it more kid-friendly, less institutional," she says. Aside from the remodeling plans, MacLeman also hopes to work with teenagers, possibly forming youth groups to provide support for foster teens.

For more information on becoming a foster parent, contact the DCF at their toll-free hotline, 1-888-KID-HERO.